

Drawing the Line Between Violence and Non-Violence in Gandhi and Fanon: deceits  
and conceits

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**Introduction**

The concept of masquerade has many associated meanings, including those of deception, masking, disguise, ambiguity, play and invention. As Tseëlon suggests, one can extend the notion of masquerade to the meaning of concepts in general and use it to challenge taken for granted conceptual essentialism: “Masquerade unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions.” [Tseëlon 2001: 3] Traditionally, in the history of western political thought, violence and nonviolence are defined in terms of just such a fantasy of stable, mutually exclusive division. The two terms are understood in terms of a binary opposition, with a settled meaning in theory and practice as alternative, antithetical, instruments for the achievement of political ends. In this chapter we are interested in the ways in which the concepts of violence and nonviolence respectively are understood and legitimated in the work of Mohandas Gandhi [1869-1948] and Frantz Fanon [1925-1961]. Gandhi and Fanon were both involved in resistance to colonial violence in its ideological as well as material manifestations. And they were both fully committed to finding new ways of doing politics beyond colonialism and imperialism, but also beyond an anti-imperial, anti-colonial reaction. As our title suggests, we argue that Gandhi and Fanon theorise explicitly and implicitly the various ways in which both violence and nonviolence can be deceptive as practices and concepts (*deceits*), and that their work tells us that fixing the meaning of either category, even if only temporarily, often

requires paradoxical argumentative moves which bring together terms normally considered antithetical in order to create new meaning (*conceits*). In this respect, the work of these thinkers combines elements of masquerade. It brings together processes of unmasking with recognition of unavoidable ambiguity and also with inventive attempts to stabilise new meanings for a new politics. At the same time, we suggest that successful reinventions of our political vocabulary invariably draw on our existing conceptual repertoire, anchoring new meanings in familiar categories. This means that the liberating of our political imaginations is never the straightforward replacement of appearance with an unmasked reality, but rather a new masquerade, which will bring with it familiar as well as novel deceptions, constraints, ambiguities and creative possibilities. Key sources for our argument are *Truth and Non-Violence*, Volume II of *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* [Gandhi 1986], *Hind Swaraj* [Gandhi 1997, fp.1909], *The Wretched of the Earth* [Fanon 1965 fp. 1961], and *Black Skin White Masks* [Fanon 1986 fp 1956].

Gandhi and Fanon were both leading activists in struggles against colonial oppression. Although their diagnoses were by no means identical, both of them identified European imperialism and colonialism with violence in a very strong sense. In Gandhi's case, British imperialism, and modern, western civilization more generally, exemplified violence and coercion (*himsa*). In Fanon's case, colonialism, in particular settler colonialism, was violent in a more absolute sense that pervaded all aspects of the lives of both colonisers and colonised. For Gandhi, the key strategy for successful decolonisation was *non-violence* (*ahimsa*) in pursuit of a political project of individual and collective self-rule in which villages were republics, and the (Indian) nation a civilisation that could exemplify a radically new form of political community for the world as a whole. For Fanon, *violence* had to be the strategy of the

colonised. This was to be a violence that was fundamentally opposed to the violence of the coloniser, in itself and its ends. And it opened the way, famously, to a new 'history of Man', radically different to the *violent* European history of 'man'. In different ways, therefore, Gandhi and Fanon articulated political agendas of radical novelty, their chosen ways of responding to an oppressive present were experimental and oriented towards a future that could not yet be fully known or even imagined.

Gandhi's and Fanon's thought and their constructions of political agency are normally interpreted as antithetical [see Farber 1981; Srivastava 2010; Howard 2011]. They were both important figures (at different times) in the theory and practice of anti-colonial wars and processes of decolonisation in the twentieth century, and were seen as representing alternative models of how decolonisation should be pursued. They have also been seen subsequently as offering two rival theories of how truth should speak to power for liberation and civil rights movements in divided and hierarchical societies (notably, Apartheid South Africa and the segregated South of the United States). Nevertheless, in what follows, we suggest that the apparent, clear-cut, opposition between the two thinkers, the apostle of nonviolence on the one hand and of violence on the other, masks a more complex story. On examination, the ways in which Gandhi and Fanon conceptualise and legitimate nonviolence and violence respectively involve an ongoing construction and negotiation of the conceptual and practical boundaries of nonviolence and violence. This process is enmeshed in claims about truth and politics, means and ends, mind and body, individual and collective, and it is accomplished as much through story-telling as through abstracted analysis. For both thinkers, a language of gender and war, which enables the identification of non-violence and violence respectively with manliness, emerges as a key conceit for

salvaging and maintaining the meaningfulness and legitimacy of their commitment to non-violent or violent forms of resistance.

## **Gandhi.**

Gandhi's words and his works are, of course, inspirational for pacifist traditions including anti-war discourses and campaigns, critiques of state and social violence, and nonviolent resistance to injustice. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that Gandhi's words and works also contain ambiguous elements of coercion, conflict and aggression, and further that his theory of virtue, focussed as it is on courage and strength, leads him both to risk violence in certain contexts, and even, arguably, to prefer it in some.[Brown 1989 p.337, Devji 2012] Some of his interpreters emphasise strength, courage, and conflict (that is to say, conflict with the unjust, or conflict with those who have the power to right injustice but do not exercise it) as internal to Gandhian nonviolence (*ahimsa*), while violence in the sense of injury to another using physical weapons is quite ruled out. On this view, to use violence is to cross a moral, spiritual, and practical boundary. [Jeurgensmeyer 2002] But even this clear violence v nonviolence distinction leaves it ambiguous whether coercion is a betrayal or a realisation of nonviolence. The ideal of 'force', as in Gandhi's conception of 'soul force' or 'truth force' (*satyagraha*) either determines another's actions, making it necessary for them to act in a certain way, or dramatically cuts down the other's options for action. At some times Gandhi judged himself to have overstepped a boundary in exercising such nonviolent coercion. He repeatedly castigated himself for not having practiced *ahimsa* fully. At other times, it seems that although force in the form of non-violent pressure is coercive, it is nevertheless morally and spiritually acceptable.

Other interpreters emphasise Gandhi's own deeply conflicted and ambiguous relationship with violence as such. Violence tempted him, he risked it where other political actors did not, and violence was often the (forseeable) outcome of his actions. On the account of some critics, his discourses on nonviolence are displacements of violence - and they fail to evade or eradicate it. [Erikson 1969 p.231] His valorisation of suffering in the form of self-sacrifice can also be interpreted as self-harm, with harmful effects on others. Gandhi himself stated unambiguously that heroic violence is clearly preferable to cowardly nonviolence. "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence." [Gandhi 1986: 298] Yet, heroic nonviolence is infinitely preferable to either of the above, he speaks for instance of a nonviolent approach to a rapist or other violent criminal, that if genuine and rooted in love, will provide a more effective remedy against wrongdoing than brute force.[213]

In his correspondence Gandhi faced difficult cases again and again - questions such as whether it is permissible to drive monkeys away from the garden, whether even vegetarianism involves violence to creation, how one should intervene to save a child from a murderer. His strategy in response was consistently to emphasise that nonviolence can never be perfect, on this earth - much as one would like to avoid all evil, and much as one believes in the sacredness of all life, one cannot hesitate to attack the monkeys in order to save the crops.[Gandhi 1986: 219-238] This looks like a strategy of trade-off or balance - a practice of perfectionism premised on the minimisation of imperfection; an account of action that aims at achieving the optimal balance between good and necessary bad. However, Gandhi also articulates a perfectionist principle of character which involves a distinct construction of 'perfection'. The resort to violence requires the unflinching faith of the nonviolent

man; there cannot be any trace of violence 'either in my plans or in my thoughts'.

What matters here is the motivation, the spirit, in which one approaches conflict.

Nonviolence, then, is a force that is to some extent independent of acts and outcomes

- it consists in or involves an absence of ill will or anger [301].

Gandhian analysis of these cases, and of the practice of nonviolence, is characterised by the grammar of positive and negative, a vocabulary of 'is' and 'is not', which leads him into difficult complexities and tensions which evidently do not escape him. When the surgeon uses a knife on a patient to relieve suffering, it is nonviolent. In the right circumstances, causing suffering to one in order to benefit another, doing so dispassionately and unselfishly, is nonviolent. [264]. By contrast, weighing in against a rapist with a weapon is violent. If destruction is violent and negative, though, then so too is the act of creation. Procreation involves violence, and active sexuality is contrasted with the *ahimsa* of chastity, self-denial and self-sacrifice. [536; Devji 2012: 100] He conceives the practices of spinning, celibacy, suffering, nonviolence as having sometimes coercive effects. Yet, they are positive, as compared with the negativity of the world of capital and colonialism. As well as the 'is' and 'is not' language, with its confusing corollaries of negative and positive in the senses of bad and good, of abstinence and engagement, with which he attempts to answer his puzzled correspondents, Gandhi also insists on the language of experiment. Spinning, celibacy, suffering, nonviolence are experiments in freedom and with truth. In a world suffused with the violence of racism and imperialism, the casual daily violence of the coloniser, the threat of deadly and atrocious spirals of retaliation and revenge, Gandhi has to 'test' whether nonviolence could sterilise the atmosphere.[Brown 337] There is a tension between the kind of deontological, Kantian, grammar which insists on the irreducible principle of nonviolence, and on

Gandhi's consistent emphasis on duties as opposed to rights and the uncertainty, the trials, of experiment.

It is evident that Gandhi's understanding of the meaning of non-violence is complex and not always clear. According to Devji's reading, in his struggles with the grammar and metaphysics, as it were, of violence and non-violence, Gandhi 'sees complicated entanglements, and no easy distinctions'. [Devji 2012: 99; cf also Galtung 1965] The meaning of non-violence is produced, we suggest, in articulation with a range of other moral and political commitments, including commitments to a particular conception of truth, to the rejection of the distinction between means and ends, and to a specific understanding of the relation between mind and body, individual and collective. Gandhi postulates truth as the highest goal [Gandhi 1986: 166-7; Parekh 1989: 67], but persons on earth can only seek truth, and that in a situation in which truth is only seen and reached in fragments [Parekh: 147], and in which different persons see truth differently. [Galtung 1959: 73; Terchek 2011: 118] The realm of truth itself is a realm of uncertainty from the perspective of particular individual or collective actors.

One way of interpreting the implications of this uncertainty is to link it to a need to self-limit the consequences of political action. Because no one can be sure of the truth, nonviolence, which will be less irreversible in its effects than the use of violence, is necessarily preferable to violence. It is for this reason that Mantena identifies Gandhi with a kind of political realism [Mantena 2012: 460]. Yet Gandhi also identifies *ahimsa* with truth, his is a politics of certainty and conviction. Gandhi's truth is set against the politics both of colonialism and of nationalism and violent revolution. [Gandhi 1997] His language shifts between a rejection of consequentialist frameworks for thinking about *ahimsa*, and asserting its superior

effectiveness, at least in the long term, in bringing about radical change: “Only fair means can produce fair results, and that, at least in the majority of cases, if not indeed in all, the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms.” [Gandhi 1997: 84] The lack of certainty, the complexity of context can mean that violence may be the ‘right’ or ‘less evil’ (less violent) thing to do. And yet at other points, nonviolence appears as a non-negotiable absolute.

For Gandhi *ahimsa* is a bodily and spiritual practice, one that requires constant training and self-discipline. It cannot be thought of in purely instrumental terms, because it has to be self-consciously practiced physically and mentally. In being so practiced it is already the realisation of truth – the means become the end itself. However, intentionality is central to the proper realisation of *ahimsa*: “– to cause pain or to wish ill or to take the life of any living being out of anger or a selfish interest is *himsa*. On the other hand after a calm and clear judgment to kill or cause pain to a living being with a view to its spiritual or physical benefit from a pure selfless interest may be the purest form of *ahimsa*. Each such case must be judged individually and on its own merits. *The final test as to its violence or non-violence is after all the intent underlying the act.*” [Gandhi 1986: 273, emphasis added] More succinctly, “Non-violence is a quality of the heart. Whether there is violence or nonviolence in our actions can be judged only by the spirit behind them.” [347]

This way of conceptualising *ahimsa* allows Gandhi both to identify violence underlying apparent nonviolence in the actions of *satyagrahi*, including his own, and to identify nonviolence underlying apparent violence (*himsa*) if undertaken in the spirit of compassion to others (euthanasia), or to oneself in the spirit of taking on suffering for a good end. *Ahimsa* is linked by Gandhi, both in his writings and his political actions such as fasting, to an ideal of self-sacrifice and a strong rejection of



the principle of the sanctity of human life or of life per se in any absolute sense. The virtue of *ahimsa* involves the willingness to die but not to take life, something that Gandhi identifies as the essential martial virtue: “Who is the true warrior – he who keeps death as a bosom friend or he who controls the death of others?” [1997: 93] The possibility of distinguishing between inward and outward violence or non-violence complicates and undermines any absolute or decontextualized distinction between them. And this tendency is exacerbated when *ahimsa* is scaled up from the level of individual spiritual transformation to a collective project. If Gandhi sometimes has doubts about the purity of his own intentions, he is even more concerned about the impossibility of being sure about the sincerity of those participating in mass movements. In his view this explains the failure of certain *satyagraha* campaigns which culminated in violence, it had to be because they did not fully instantiate *ahimsa*, but included those using nonviolence instrumentally but with violence in their hearts: “Though we did no retaliate, we had harboured anger, our speech was not free from violence, our thoughts still less so.” [1986: 232]

Gandhi was perpetually required to respond to an enormous volume of correspondence raising queries about the meanings of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, and correspondents often accused him of unclarity, hypocrisy and contradiction in his own practices. He frequently acknowledged apparent inconsistencies in, and the necessary fallibility of, his views, for instance in response to questions from western pacifists about why he supported the British in the Boer War and WW1. His responses to his interlocutors demonstrate a variety of strategies for dealing with conceptual and practical difficulties. Three of these are particularly notable. First, the invocation of the inward versus outward distinction already referred to above. What appears to be the same act may count as *himsa* or *ahimsa* depending on intention. Second, the

invocation of standpoint and position as in itself changing the meaning of a particular act or commitment. For example Gandhi's view was that his position as a colonised 'mouse' required identification with the imperial 'cat' in the case of the Boer War and WW1, in order to identify the colonised with the virtue of courage that the coloniser assumed they did not have, and thus gain recognition as a worthy interlocutor. In this connection he says: "May it not be necessary for me as a member of the mouse tribe to participate in my principal's desire for wreaking destruction even for the purpose of teaching him the superiority of non-destruction." [1986: 471] Third, relating genuine *ahimsa* itself to the touchstone of courage and manliness that has been denied to the Indian by the emasculating effects of British colonisation, often by telling stories or drawing analogies in which a highly gendered conception of warrior honour does the work of making clear what counts as *ahimsa* within a particular context.

Gandhi's views on sex, gender and sexuality were complicated. On the one hand, as Fanon was, Gandhi was committed to political and legal equality for women. In addition, he explicitly identified personally with feminine virtues, and as has been noted, could be seen as profoundly challenging conventional gendered assumptions in his own practices as well as in the ways in which he opened up the anti-colonial movement to women's participation. [1986: 168-9; Hyslop: 49] In contrast to the argument made above in response to the Western pacifists, he deliberately and effectively played on his own feminisation in his struggle against British colonialism and in his arguments with more violent strands of anti-colonial resistance and nationalism [Nandy 2004: 64]. Nevertheless, Gandhi's view of women's equality was fundamentally one in which they were accorded equality of value in a different sphere to men, characterised by different virtues. His view of women's value is in many ways reminiscent of high Victorian celebrations of women as guardians of hearth and

home and religious values, the moral educators of young children, and selfless supporters of husbands and sons. In contrast, again in keeping with Victorian values in many respects, the virtues of men are outward looking, they involve duties of protection and courage. [Devji: 97]

Following on from this particular gendered script, the language of manhood, courage and honour as a way of making clear what counts as genuine non-violence is ubiquitous in Gandhi's writings. The worst thing always is to be a coward or 'unmanly': "A man cannot then practise *ahimsa* and be a coward at the same time. The practice of *ahimsa* calls forth the greatest courage. It is the most soldierly of a soldier's virtues." [Gandhi 1986: 213] In explaining what he means by this, Gandhi moves between references to actual historical examples of effective *ahimsa*, stories and parables drawn from Hindu and other religious texts, and hypothetical examples. One parable that explains the power of *ahimsa*, is about a situation in which a tyrant attempts to rape a 'helpless girl'. In these circumstances, Gandhi explains, that the girl will be better protected by a defender who is a follower of *ahimsa*, because in this case the tyrant will have to 'walk to his victim over the dead body of her defender' and 'as the defender has matched his very soul against the mere body of the tyrant, the odds are that the soul in the latter will be awakened, and the girl will stand an infinitely greater chance of her honour being defended than in any other conceivable circumstances – barring, of course, that of her own personal courage.' [213] The coda to this parable is revealing, the man of *ahimsa* lays his life down to defend others and inspires by his example. The girl with personal courage will, by implication, lay her own life down to defend her honour. [220] The use of this kind of parable to establish the meaning and legitimacy of nonviolence is paradoxical in its effects. It disrupts traditional categorisations of masculinity and femininity, enabling the delegitimation

not only of tyrannical colonial violence, but also of violent resistance – in a very important sense it is manly to be womanly. At the same time, this disruption of traditional categories depends and plays on the power of a terminology of manliness, courage and honour that renders the meaning of true courage in men and women in terms that reinforce traditional categorisations of masculinity and femininity.

## **Fanon**

Like Gandhi, Fanon thought that resistance to colonial violence entailed a fundamentally new politics at the level of the individual and the collective. In his earlier work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, he explicitly played with the language of masking and unmasking in order to resist an anti-colonial politics either of assimilation with the European or of African essentialism: “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence.” [Fanon 1986 fp 1952: 229]. For Fanon, however, the invention of new politics entailed commitment to violence rather than nonviolence. At the All Africa People's Conference held in Accra in December 1958, Fanon challenged Kwame Nkrumah's Gandhian principles of nonviolence [Young 2001: 249]. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, nonviolence figures for Fanon as a dishonest temptation designed to perpetuate the power of colonisers over colonised. He says: “At the decisive moment, the colonialist bourgeoisie, which up till then has remained inactive, comes into the field. It introduces the new idea which is in proper parlance a creation of the colonial situation: non-violence.” [Fanon 1965b: 48] This isn't a direct riposte to Gandhi. In this context, Fanon is thinking of non-violence in the sense of negotiated processes of decolonisation, which entail compromises between colonialist and emergent national

elites. Nevertheless, this dismissal of nonviolent processes is bound up with Fanon's fundamental diagnosis of colonialism.

For Fanon, in the world of colonization, non-violence is, ultimately, a refusal of responsibility. It is co-opted by the colonizers and allows the totalising violence of colonialism to remain in place. At best it is complicit with colonial violence, at worst it is an aspect of colonial violence, which perpetuates itself via emergent elites in the settlements and preferential (to the colonial power) agreements that are written into decolonised states. The reason why non-violence cannot be a solution to the situation of colonialism, in particular in cases of settler colonialism such as Algeria, is that the colonised are already enmeshed in and defined by violence. [201] Fanon argues that violence perpetrated by the colonial forces is brutal, ubiquitous, and consistently enacts the supremacy of the perpetrator and the dehumanisation of the victim. In the colonial situation violence is the medium in which people have to live; so violence is not simply one amongst a variety of tools for political struggle but a necessity. In this setting politics can only be war. [105] 'For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler.' [73]

Fanon's anatomisation of the violence inherent in colonialism is complex. Violence is used by the colonists to exploit and drive the native people; it is used by the people against the settlers [72], and against each other [40-41], and it is used to spread responsibility for 'crime' and to integrate people into the violent struggle. [67] All these violences stem from the original use of pure force by the colonial power. [29] Physical and psychic violence are linked together. The violence of capitalist production acts on the mind: 'imposes on the brain rhythms which very quickly obliterate and wreck it' [254]; torture destroys the psyche of the torturer as well as the tortured [200-250]. Many varieties of violence are detailed: the apartheid ordering

and controlling of populations spatially and socially [29], the uses of police and military power; dance, religious ecstasy and sexuality [43], the ‘atmosphere of violence – fear, intimidation and the way this can under certain conditions transfer to violence ‘in action’ [56], the recruitment for war [186], the violence of the judging and classification of African people by western disciplines [244], dissimulation and hypocrisy (violence to truth) [46], the ‘peaceful violence’ of the Cold War in which the world is steeped [64-5].

Violence for Fanon is physical violence, the infliction or threat of infliction of pain – the bayonets that underpin colonization and the perpetuation of colonial power. But this physical violence is lived, internalised, experienced psychically, and it can’t be kept separate from the social, economic and political realms of engagement between colonizers and colonized and between the colonized, whether those relations are physically violent or not in any given instance. This means that even though weapons may be the same, violence as resistance to colonial power is fundamentally different to colonial violence, psychically, socially, economically and politically. The violence of the colonized is a reactive violence but it is also constructive and productive. Although Fanon writes of the ‘cleansing’ force of violence, contra Sartre’s notorious account of the text in his Preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, he also acknowledges the inadequacy of simplistic appeals to purification through violence. He is clear that anti-colonial violence cannot be solely fed by, or manifest, resentment and anger. Rather, in a way strongly analogous to Gandhi’s argument in relation to nonviolence, he argues that anti-colonial violence must recognize itself, and be practiced as, the source of a new world, a new order [111]. In doing so it becomes a means through which individuals liberate themselves from the systematic inferiorization to which colonialism subjected them, and a new mode of collective

organisation and experimentation, in which the people practice freedom and justice as well as fight for them: “The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man’s consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history.” [73]

Fanon insists that violence works. Yet he is also well aware of the myriad ways in which the use of violence may derail pursuit of the goals of freedom and justice. The kind of engagement with violence required by anti-colonial struggle relies on exceptionally high levels of control and self-discipline in the face of intolerable provocation. He also emphasises, as much as he emphasises the cleansing function of violence and its empowering effects, its traumatising damaging effects, on both perpetrators and victims - effects which are transmitted down the generations to children, and across social networks through domestic violence, mental illness and so on. [200-250] “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” [200] Simone de Beauvoir reports that Fanon himself was clearly traumatised, when they met, by his own engagements with violence - attempts had been made on his life - and with his nightmares of the violence yet to come in the maghreb as the French military, police and special forces performed the final acts of colonialism, and the 'liberated' society engaged in violence.[Beauvoir 1965: 59] In one sense the final chapter of *Wretched of the Earth*, ‘Colonial War and Mental Disorders’ confirms the pathologies which accompany colonialism – the internalisation of the violence on which it is based. It also, however, demonstrates the pathologies that accompany the war of liberation and in doing so puts violence into question. Fanon offers lists and examples of the ways in which committing and suffering, or even being associated

with, violence leaves traumatic traces on the psyches of individuals. He could be seen as laying out problems that are or will be treatable over time, but on the whole his conclusions are more pessimistic. Rather than being freed ‘from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction’ (94), rather than violence being a ‘cleansing force’ [94], violence actually paralyses action, leaves some inert, others anxious, unable to sleep, depressed, ill in a variety of ways [Frazer and Hutchings 2008].

At a point earlier in the book, Fanon approvingly quotes from a Césaire play, in which the slave liberates himself through the killing of the master. [Fanon 1965b: 68-9] In the final chapter, Fanon refers to a case in which two children killed their European friend in the context of a politics in which they know that French people want to kill Algerians. But where the earlier narrative has a heroic ring to it, the story of the children demonstrates how in the context of colonial war, they become detached from feeling and the capacity to make judgments about responsibility. It seems in this respect that the colonised is caught in a trap if violence is the only mechanism through which the absolute racialised violence of colonialism can be fought. Fanon is fully aware of such traps but is wary of using them as a ground for inaction. In the same way as Gandhi emphasises the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of actions, so Fanon acknowledges the open-endedness of the implications of anti-colonial violence, and the ever present possibility of unintended consequences undoing its effects: “In other words, we are forever pursued by our actions. Their ordering, their circumstances and their motivation may perfectly well come to be profoundly modified *a posteriori*. This is merely one of the snares that history and its various influences sets for us. But can we escape becoming dizzy? And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?” [203, footnote]



As with Gandhi's account of non-violence, Fanon's account of violence is complex and shifting and makes sense only in the context of a broader range of concepts and commitments, including ideas about truth, the relations of means to ends, and the relation between mind and body, individual and collective. Towards the beginning of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon contrasts the transparency and directness of the native's violent response to oppression with the hypocrisy and cowardice of urban elites committed to non-violence. Truth is not about an abstract absolute standard but is inherent in the goals of political actors: "In every age, among the people, truth is the property of the national cause. No absolute verity, no discourse on the purity of the soul can shake this position". [39] This means that anti-colonial truth is a work in progress, it is a truth is to be made rather than revealed even though it needs to be pursued with absolute conviction. This conception of truth is distinct from Gandhi's, but it raises the same kind of paradoxes of certainty (conviction) and uncertainty (incompletion) and is also linked to a challenge to the means and ends distinction and how it is that anti-colonial violence can be considered as an end in itself. Fanon's depiction of anti-colonial violence as both instrument and end echoes Gandhi's account of *ahimsa* as simultaneously the most effective way of ensuring change, and the actualisation of that change at both individual and collective levels.

Fanon understands mind and body as fundamentally, reciprocally related. For him, the practice of anti-colonial violence is about the transformation of mind and body. At the point at which the native 'surges into the forbidden quarters' [31], he assumes historical agency self-consciously: "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect." [74] However, embodying history cannot rest at the level of individual acts of violence, it is fully

realised in the organisation and discipline of anti-colonial fighters, dealing not only with ousting colonial power but also with setting right military, social, economic and personal injustices, from dealing with breaches of military law, to food distribution, to the appropriate response of husbands to the rape of their wives. Fanon was clearly deeply impressed by the FLN's organization. He describes regions where 'interesting experiments' have been made with the transformation of systems of provisioning and production, and how these in turn transformed the understanding of the people of the meaning and purpose of work, and their rights over their own land and its produce [154-5]. These examples illustrate 'the important part played by the war in leading them [Algerians] towards consciousness of themselves' [155]. The practice of violence is the construction of a collective, it: " - - binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning." [73] Violence as a practice of mind and body for Fanon, is about self-discipline and the assumption of agency, it follows from a conviction of truth, in the absence of certain knowledge, and it constructs a distinctive collective force against the forces of colonialism that simultaneously experiments with the challenges of governance in a new, post-colonial condition.

It would be misleading to overstate similarities between Gandhi's and Fanon's ways of explaining and legitimating their chosen route towards liberation from colonial power. Nevertheless, in both cases as well as overlaps in their specific claims about practices of violence/ non-violence and how they relate to the aims of revolutionary struggle, they also share the identity of activist communicators who were concerned to persuade different publics of the legitimacy and efficacy of their choices. Like Gandhi, Fanon has to pre-empt or respond to challenges to his analysis

and practice coming from fellow-activists as well as from the colonial power. In Fanon's case, this means being able to defend the difference between the violence of anti-colonial struggle and the colonial violence it challenges, and being able to defend the efficacy of anti-colonial violence given his own awareness of the potentially pathological outcomes that may follow from it, for individuals and for emerging post-colonial nations. There are a variety of strategies through which Fanon makes his case. One is through an argument from necessity, in which it is claimed that in the 'absolute' violence of colonialism, the only way to assert political agency is through counter-violence. This strategy is particularly emphasised in the earlier part of the texts where Fanon focuses on the ways in which participation in anti-colonial violence marks the emergence of historical agency on the part of the colonised. A second way in which Fanon grounds his argument is through his account of truth, in which the difference between anti-colonial and colonial violence is an absolute difference between the kind of subjectivity and collective identity that it (the violence) cultivates. Because truth is fundamentally political, the two kinds of violence are essentially incommensurable worlds that cannot be judged in terms of each other. A third strategy, once more echoing Gandhi, is by telling stories or making analogies which anchor the distinction between colonial and anti-colonial violence in stories of war and masculinity.

As with Gandhi, Fanon is committed to gender equality and famously highlights the involvements of women in the Algerian war of independence in some of his writings [see Fanon 1965a; 1967], but not in *Wretched of the Earth*. In this text, women figure only marginally, the 'native' is represented as a man, and a resistant 'native' is one asserting his masculinity in the face of the emasculating effects of colonial oppression. In the Césaire drama quoted at length early in the book [Fanon

1965b: 68-9], two characters speak, 'the Rebel' and 'the Mother', both slaves. The Rebel is facing death as a consequence of killing the master. In the extract reproduced, the Mother stands in for the (weak and unconvincing) claims of Christian universalism and nonviolence and also for the particular attachment and obligations pertaining to the relation of mother and son, though she presents no arguments and says very little. The Rebel, her son, speaks for the experience of racial oppression and slavery, the absoluteness of colonialist violence, and the necessity of counter-violence against the oppressor whatever the risks, a baptism of blood in opposition to Christian baptism, in which a false name and identity has been imposed.

Although Fanon was clearly cognisant and supportive of the role of women in the Algerian liberation war, in the fictional stories and the case histories that he tells in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the text in which he made the case for the necessity of violence, women rarely figure as fighters, they are almost invariably cast in a passive role. They are either 'dishonoured', made ill by being in refugee camps, pacifistic and therefore co-opted by colonialism or bearers of their father's sins. The cleansing and liberating experience of violence is told as a story of redeeming manhood, in ways that recall Gandhi's parallel situating of *ahimsa* as the redemption of colonised man. Once more the invention of a new political vocabulary is in part dependent on the utilisation of a familiar one, so that the liberation of men and women through colonial struggle is simultaneously the assertion of their (men's and women's) difference, before, during and presumably after the colonial struggle.

### **Conclusion: Deceits and Conceits**

In contrast to predominant traditions of political thought, which treat violence and nonviolence as mutually exclusive means for the pursuit of political ends, neither

Gandhi nor Fanon permit any easy answer to the questions of what nonviolence or violence mean, or how they can be justified. They both offer us accounts of politics and violence as mutually imbricated, something that has to be lived with and through if there is to be a future in which the relation between politics and violence may be differently articulated. They both speak to the impossibility of an easy transcendence of violence in politics, whether through nonviolence or violence. They both illuminate the intimate relations between the modern state and violence, and demonstrate how the relation between politics and violence is produced and reproduced, and must therefore also be contested and resisted, in experiments at the level of individual as well as collective assumptions and practices.

Although their positions are very different, because they were paying attention to violence or nonviolence as such, Gandhi and Fanon both make explicit persistent difficulties in defining and legitimising these terms. Both were fully aware, for different reasons, of the likely deceptiveness of the means they had identified as an instantiation of freedom. In Gandhi's case he constantly explores the fragility of the line between violence and non-violence, not only demonstrating how non-violence may collapse into, or turn out to disguise, violence, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, suggesting that in some circumstances violence might be closer to the essence of *ahimsa* than a refusal of it. In Fanon's case, we are shown how apparent nonviolence may perpetuate colonial violence, and the claimed efficacy of anti-colonial violence is undermined by his own observations of its pathological effects. These *deceits* of violence and non-violence draw attention not only to the question of how the two concepts and practices relate to each other, and whether and how we draw the line between them, but also to other kinds of line-drawing. How are distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence or non-violence

sustained? Gandhi works with a moral vocabulary of virtue but also one of pure intention, mixing deontological and character and duty based arguments. Fanon's normative vocabulary is more fundamentally political, couched in terms of individual and collective liberation that are not always consistent with one another. For instance, we can contrast the moment of personal liberation in the murder of the master, and the bureaucratic and educative processes through which the FLN manage the production of food.

In both cases, however, they understood that the work of establishing a new kind of political community was an open-ended creative, but also paradoxical, process, for which an adequate vocabulary might not yet be available. They were clear that the kind of work in which they were engaged could not be pursued at all without danger and risk to the ends being pursued. Failures were inevitable and not specifically foreseeable. It is in this context of uncertainty and the recognition of the likely deceits of their chosen non-violent or violent routes to a different kind of world, that they both made use of stories, analogies and examples to help fix and explain its meaning and value. A *conceit* is an image or metaphor in which a truth is encapsulated in a paradoxical way, but conceits rely on some stability of meaning in order for the novel expression to be recognisable. In the case of both Gandhi and Fanon, we suggest that a persistent conceit is one that links liberation from colonialism to a redeemed masculinity, specifically identified with martial virtue. In the shifting and complex terrain of an ongoing political struggle oriented towards novel forms of political order, one of the ways to anchor the meaningfulness of that struggle, whether conceived and practiced in violent or non-violent terms is in relation to familiar gendered constructions of masculine courage and honour. However, it would be misleading to conclude that this is the end of the story. The gendered terms

that Gandhi and Fanon used to help explain and legitimate their politics in relation to nonviolence and violence are also ones that may be undercut and complicated by other aspects of their analysis. In the context of carnival, masquerade is quintessentially about the crossing and blurring of boundaries of gender. And the work of Gandhi and Fanon, in its persistent unsettling of taken for granted binary thinking, provokes as much as it pre-empts the question of whether a novel form of political order can emerge without a transformation of the gendered terms of our political imagination.

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